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AUTHOR Ascher, Carol
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ABSTRACT

This brief digest discusses teenage pregnancy and various educational strategies that appear to affect pregnancy rates. While pregnancy among white teenagers has increased since the 1970s, the birthrate among black teenagers is still five to eight times higher. Teenage mothers and fathers have lower educational attainment and income than their peers who delay childbearing. Early parenthood has short- and long-term consequences for the children as well. Babies of teenage mothers are at risk for low birth weight and high infant mortality; moreover, children of adolescent parents tend to become teenage parents themselves. Some studies show that teenage parents risk alienation from school, unemployment, or underemployment. In contrast, positive school experiences and steady progress toward employment reduce the changes of teenage pregnancy. Preschool education has been found to correlate positively with later lower delinquency and pregnancy rates in teenagers. Desegregation was also found to correlate positively with a reduction in pregnancy before the age of 18. High educational goals appear to be related to a lower incidence of adolescent pregnancy. Finally, several studies of job training programs show that for those students who do not have aspirations towards higher education, appropriate preparation for employment may serve the same positive purpose in reducing teenage pregnancy. (CG)

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IMPROVING SCHOOLING TO REDUCE TEENAGE PREGNANCY

The number of pregnancies and out-of-wedlock births to teenage mothers and fathers is a national problem. American teenagers become pregnant, give birth, and have abortions at significantly higher rates than do adolescents in any other industrialized nation. Although pregnancy among white teenagers has increased greatly since the early 1970s, largely because of increased sexual activity, the black teenage birthrate is still five to eight times higher. Black girls, who constitute only about a tenth of the teenage population, have more than half the babies born to single teenagers (Hulbert, 1984).

The consequences of teenage pregnancy are both immediate and long term. In part because of a lack of prenatal services, babies of teenage mothers are at risk for low birth weight and higher infant mortality. Teenage mothers themselves complete an average of four fewer years of school and go on to earn about half as high as income as do their peers who have waited until their 20s to have children. Adolescent fathers are two-fifths less likely to graduate from high school than those who wait. Finally, children of adolescent parents tend themselves to become teenage parents, thus continuing a cycle of low educational attainment, underemployment, joblessness, and poverty.

Options, Dreams, and Choices

Teenage pregnancy is rarely intended. However, teenagers do make choices about having sex, using contraception, bringing a pregnancy to term, and keeping a child. In doing so, they are responding to their complex social and psychological world and to the opportunities that they see available to them.

For example, students who are alienated from school and those who drop out are at risk to become pregnant (Moore, 1984). Many girls become pregnant out of a hope for emotional ties or for status and security they despair of getting in other ways. Being unemployed may increase the desirability of early pregnancy; one study found that pregnant teenagers who were not employed tended to value parenthood as a means of creativity and achievement more than their employed peers did (Michaels and Brown, 1983). Unrealistic fantasies about parenting, and about the ways in which birth fathers and grandparents will help, also influence teenagers' decisions to have children.

On the other hand, high goals, positive school experiences, and steady progress toward employment appear to be important factors in reducing adolescent pregnancy. Several widely ranging studies have shown the effects of educational interventions that raise aspirations and achievement long before the teenager is faced with an unwanted pregnancy.

Preschooling

A very thorough longitudinal study by Berreuta-Clement et al. (1984) suggests that early childhood education can have surprising long-term results. Looking at what has happened fifteen years later to 125 poor, black preschoolers from the Perry Preschool in Ypsilanti, Michigan, the researchers found that these adolescents perform better intellectually, are enrolled less frequently in special education classes, and drop out of school less often than their peers who had no preschool experience. Moreover, these students are more likely to be employed the year after high school and to have lower delinquency and pregnancy rates.

Desegregation

A large study conducted by the Center for Social Organization of Schools at Johns Hopkins University and the Rand Corporation (Crain et al., 1985)

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compared about 300 black pupils who were bused to predominantly white suburban schools with 300 black pupils who remained in mostly black inner city schools in Hartford. Although the "desegregated" suburban environment was not always a friendly one, it had a number of interesting effects on black students. In addition to feeling more at ease in predominantly white settings as late adolescents and adults, and so attending white colleges more often and working more frequently in predominantly white settings, these desegregated black students were more likely to graduate from high school, were involved in fewer incidents with the police, and the females in the group were less likely to have a child before they were 18 years old.

High Aspirations

High educational goals, particularly if they are acted upon in terms of choosing appropriate courses, appear to be related to a lower incidence of adolescent pregnancy. Hogan and Kitigawa (1983) report that in Chicago, black teenagers of comparable circumstances were 53 percent less likely to have had sex if they desired a college degree than if they did not. Black teens without college aspirations were 85 percent more likely to become pregnant. Moore and Hoffreth (1980) also found that being in a college preparatory curriculum significantly raises the age at first childbirth.

Preparation for Work

Not all students, of course, expect to go to college. Several studies of job training programs show that education that clearly leads to employment can also be effective in reducing pregnancy and childbirth. A follow-up study of Job Corps participants showed the birth rate to be 14 percent lower, and the illegitimacy rate 4 percent lower, for all women participants relative to a control group (cited in Moore et al., 1984). Similarly, an experimental program designed to test the effects of replacing the current welfare system with a combination of a negative income tax and various counseling/job training components resulted in reductions in fertility among single black women participants by at least 31 percent and in some cases by as much as 49 percent (cited in Moore et al., 1984).

These broad educational strategies do not lessen the need for or effectiveness of school programs that directly address early pregnancy. However, many students at risk for teenage pregnancy drop out of school long before such services as sex educational, counseling, life-decision courses, or school-based health clinics are available. It is important to understand that the cycle of teenage pregnancy can be broken by general educational improvement—by offering a curriculum that leads to work and/or further schooling, and by helping students to succeed in school and achieve high goals.

— Carol Ascher

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ERIC Clearinghouse on Urban Education
Institute for Urban and Minority Education
Box 40
Teachers College, Columbia University
New York, NY 10027
(212) 678-3433
Erwin Flaxman, Director

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